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The role of geopolitics in Turkey's diplomatic approach to the Second East Turkestan Republic (1939–1949)

Serdar Yurtcicek 

Center for Turkish Studies, College of Liberal Arts and Institute of Global Studies, Shanghai University, Shanghai, People's Republic of China

ABSTRACT

Using the Ankara-based Turkish Diplomatic Archives (thrown open to the public recently), this paper explores how Turkey's diplomatic line on (what is currently called) the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) People's Republic of China unfolded through the decade following Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's death on 10 November 1938. The documents studied here are chiefly diplomatic correspondences from the Turkish outposts in China, Japan and Afghanistan dating from 1939–1949. The study outlines how Turkey readjusted itself vis-a-vis the Uyghurs in response to its evolving geo-strategic needs – to which its religious, linguistic, and cultural continuities with the Uyghurs were secondary.

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Introduction

After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of the Turkish Republic, as a new and secular government in Ankara sought to negotiate relations with Muslim communities abroad, Xinjiang proved a particular challenge. Following its reconquest of Xinjiang during 1755–1759, the Qing dynasty recognized the region's demographic diversity and managed it through ethnic categorization, viewing the Muslim inhabitants as subjects not to be assimilated into the Chinese civilization (Hamada 1990; Rudelson 1997). Through 1760–1830, as the Chinese population in Xinjiang increased, Qing authorities restricted Chinese settlers from permanent residence in the Tarim Basin, maintaining traditional Muslim communities with minimal change until 1878 under a dual governance system of military and Islamic administration (Garnaut 2008; Millward 2007). After the Dungan Revolt in the late nineteenth century, however, the Qing dynasty restored full administrative control in 1878 and reversed their previous governance approach in Xinjiang, taking full control in 1878 and directly appointing governors, which inadvertently fuelled Uyghur national consciousness amid global Turkic nationalist movements (Hamada 1990). This Uyghur nationalism and the significant migration of Uyghurs to the Russian Empire's Semirechenskaya oblast during the 1880s have been predominantly documented by Russian scholars, highlighting a pan-Turkic sentiment

CONTACT Serdar Yurtcicek  serdaryurtcicek@gmail.com

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that aimed to unite Turkic peoples across a vast region (Kamalov 2012; Kamalov 2016). Despite the historical significance of these events, academic focus on the early 1900s Turkic Muslim nationalistic movements and their link to modern Turkey remained sparse until recent decades, partly due to previously limited archival resources (Hamada 1990).

As will be explained in the following paragraphs, the current literature is divided regarding the influence of ideological motivations (such as pan-Turkism and pan-Islamism) versus geostrategic considerations in shaping late Ottoman and early Turkish foreign policy perceptions. This article aims to provide original insights into this debate drawing on the case of Turkey's diplomatic approach to the Second East Turkestan Republic (SETR), whose establishment in 1944 represents a significant historical milestone in the development of Uyghur nationalism in the post-Qing era (Finley and Zang 2015). The analysis draws on archival data recently declassified by Presidential Decree Number 11, dated 16 July 2018. These documents, archived in the Ankara-based Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Diplomatic Archives of Turkey, constitute the foundation for examining how the Turkish diplomatic establishment comprehended the events occurring in Xinjiang from 1939 to 1949. In the study, focus is placed on the period between 1939 and 1949. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the Republic, passed away in 1938, coinciding with significant shifts in Turkey's foreign policy just before World War II. The analysis concludes in 1949, coinciding with the establishment of the People's Republic of China and China's complete control over Xinjiang. What do these diplomatic sources reveal about Turkey's approach toward Xinjiang, and whether ideological motivations or geostrategic considerations have played a more decisive role in shaping modern Turkey's stance toward the Second East Turkestan Republic? The findings indicate that Turkey's approach was primarily motivated by evolving geostrategic considerations, with religious, linguistic, and cultural ties to the Uyghurs playing a secondary role.

This study is structured as follows. Drawing on a condensed literature survey, the first section sets the stage by situating Turkey's diplomatic approach to Xinjiang within the broader context of late Ottoman and early Turkish foreign policy. The second section focuses on three individuals known as the 'Three Effendis', who would, in the subsequent period, head the first wave of the Uyghur diaspora. Mehmet Emin Buğra arrived in Turkey in 1951, and Isa Yusuf Alptekin followed in 1954. They were instrumental in initiating efforts to preserve Uyghur culture and national identity through associations, publications, meetings, and other means. This section uses archival data to shed light on the roles and relationships of notable Uyghur figures like Mehmet Emin Buğra, Isa Yusuf Alptekin, and Mesut Sabri Baykozi, as perceived by Turkish diplomatic representatives before these men left Xinjiang. The evidence suggests that, prior to the conclusion of World War II, Turkey interacted cautiously with the Three Effendis, prominent pan-Turkist figures in Xinjiang affairs. Turkey aimed to strengthen ties but grew mistrustful due to the differing loyalties of the Three Effendis to Britain, the Soviet Union and China. This demonstrates how strategic concerns outweighed pan-Turkist and pan-Islamist motivations in Turkey's stance on Xinjiang.

The third section examines political developments in Xinjiang upon the establishment of the SETR. Evidence from diplomatic archives reveals that, during the SETR period, Turkey endeavoured to maintain a delicate equilibrium between the Soviet Union,

which had established a proxy government in Xinjiang, and China, which prioritized the preservation of its territorial integrity over advocating for pan-Islamist and pan-Turkist ideologies in the region. Turkish diplomats' apprehensions regarding escalating tensions with the Soviet Union are evident in the archives, yet they also highlight Turkey's endorsement of China's territorial sovereignty, especially in contrast to the Soviet Union's interests.

The fourth and final section analyses the changes in Turkey's Xinjiang policies during the transition from friendly relations with the USSR to aligning with US foreign policy in the new post-World War II international system, focusing on diplomatic correspondence. Diplomatic archives reveal that British and American diplomats were actively engaged in communication with their Turkish counterparts, encouraging Turkey to utilize its influence in Xinjiang to counterbalance Soviet influence in the region. Turkish diplomats began to articulate the Soviet threat more explicitly and recognized Xinjiang as a potential link between Turkey and the United States.

The ideology-geostrategy divide: re-examining foreign policy motivations in late Ottoman and early Turkish history

The question of whether ideological motivations or geostrategic considerations played a decisive role in shaping late Ottoman and early Turkish foreign policy is a contentious issue in the literature. Some scholars argue that ideological currents, such as pan-Islamism and Turkish nationalism, were primary drivers behind key diplomatic decisions. Others contend that pragmatic geostrategic interests guided foreign policy to a greater extent. Briefly exploring these debates not only provides essential historical context but also serves as an entry point for framing the contributions and developing the argumentation of this research based on the case of Xinjiang.

Scholars such as A.D.W. Forbes (1986) suggest that the Turkic Islamic Republic of East Turkestan (TIRET) continued the Islamic legacy of the Kashgar Emirate (1865–1877), whilst others emphasize TIRET's unique nationalist traits (Karaca 2007; Yasushi 2001). While Yasushi and Karaca argue that TIRET assumed a nationalist character, Wang Ke claims that it failed to forge a strong nationalist identity because it only survived for a very short time (K. Wang 2020). There are also those who indicate that Xinjiang's rebellions and the emergence of Uyghur national identity were significantly shaped by external ideological influences like pan-Turkism and pan-Islamism (D. Wang 1997), and further developed within the context of Soviet Turkestan (Khalid 2022). This being said, the historical relationship between the Ottoman Empire (and later Turkey) and Xinjiang's Uyghur movements is rather intricate, shaped by various influences over time, with Turkey initially distancing itself from pan-Turkism and pan-Islamism to concentrate on cultivating a modern Turkish nationalism and identity (Ahmad 1995; Karaca 2013; Lewis 1961).

Regarding the Ottoman Empire's involvement in pan-Turkism and pan-Islamism, Cemil Aydin analyses how increased hostility from Europe, especially highlighted by events such as the Balkan wars and the Italian invasion of Libya, led the Ottoman Empire to actively embrace pan-Islamism and pan-Turkism as strategies to unite and strengthen its position. Aydin suggests that this shift, while aimed at countering European dominance, was executed with a pragmatic approach to modernization and international diplomacy by the Ottoman elites, balancing Islamic unity with cooperation with European nations (Aydin

2007). However, M. Şükrü Hanioglu argues that, while the roots of Turkish nationalism and Turkism predated the Balkan wars, neither Sultan Abdulhamid II nor the Ottoman Committee of Union and Progress could fully implement Turkism due to the empire's fundamental incompatibility with such nationalism (Hanioglu 2006). Similarly, Michael A. Reynolds contends that pan-Islamism and pan-Turkism had minimal impact on Ottoman policies, with Sultan Abdulhamid II using pan-Islamism chiefly to solidify Muslim loyalty within the empire and mitigate European fears of 'Muslim fanaticism' (Reynolds 2009). According to Reynolds, Ottoman actions in the Caucasus during the empire's final years were more about territorial expansion than promoting a pan-Turkic movement, adding that the Ottoman Empire provided minimal support to Turkistan during 1917–1918 (Reynolds 2011). In contrast, VanderLippe (2012) identifies pan-Turkism as a distinct ideology among the Young Turks, promoted by figures like Enver Pasha within the Committee of Union and Progress to challenge Soviet influence and expand into the Caucasus and Central Asia.

VanderLippe also points to the role of pan-Turkism in modern Turkey. During the onset of World War II, for example, Turkish public opinion was divided regarding the German invasion of the USSR on 22 June 1941, seeing both nations as threats, yet recognizing that the conflict could potentially weaken both, while possibly strengthening the eventual victor. Within this context, pan-Turkists in Turkey saw an opportunity to unify Turkic peoples across the Caucasus and Central Asia, becoming the first group in 1941 to openly challenge the Turkish government's neutral war policy, advocating for a tilt towards Germany (VanderLippe 2012). During World War II, pan-Turkism in Turkey was divided into three main subgroups: one led by Zeki Velidi Togan, who formed a secret society after returning from exile; another led by his student Reha Oğuz Türkkan, who spread pan-Turkism through publications like *Bozkurt*; and a third led by Nihal Atsız, who was notable for his Nazi-influenced ideology. Although these groups were primarily supported by immigrant and ultra-nationalist groups within Turkey, and despite their historical grievances such as the loss of Crimea, they failed to significantly alter Turkish foreign policy, largely due to the government's suppression of their activities and publications from 1941 to 1943 (Isçi 2019; VanderLippe 2012).

From 1923 to 1950, Turkey's foreign policy, influenced by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's principle of 'Peace at Home, Peace in the World', prioritized geopolitical neutrality and peace, even during the tumultuous times of World War II while cautiously considering Soviet intentions (Deringil 2003; Hale and Hale 2002). Despite initial scepticism towards international alliances like the League of Nations, which Turkey joined in 1932 with Soviet support, pan-Turkism continued as a marginal domestic political movement throughout the 1930s (Deringil 2003; Hale and Hale 2002). However, amidst the intensification of territorial disputes with the USSR after World War II, Turkey chose to align with the United States, joining NATO and supporting US-led UN forces in the Korean War, which included conflicts with the People's Republic of China, and thus shaped a new trajectory in Turkish foreign and domestic politics (Ahmad 1995). Hereafter, Turkey became the centre for separatist Uyghurs, eventually joining the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and projecting American foreign policy. In what follows, the article's analysis of Turkey's diplomatic approach to Xinjiang seems to support the hypothesis that such geostrategic considerations played a decisive role in shaping Turkish foreign-policy perceptions.

Turkey and the ‘Three Effendis’ prior to the conclusion of World War II

Commonly known as the ‘Three Effendis’,¹ Buğra, Alptekin and Baykozi were anti-Soviet, pan-Turkic leaders who vehemently opposed the SETR, a Soviet satellite state in Xinjiang. The SETR, which lasted from 12 November 1944 to 22 December 1949, was led consecutively by two pro-Soviet figures: Alihan Töre (1944–1946) and Ahmetjan Kasimi (1946–1949). The SETR criticized the Three Effendis as pro-Kuomintang (Jacobs 2008). Turkish diplomatic records frequently mention the Three Effendis, providing insights into how they were perceived by Turkish authorities and how they portrayed themselves. Drawing from these Turkish records, I outline below the roles of these three individuals in Xinjiang politics from Turkey’s perspective at the time, supplementing these descriptions with external sources where necessary.

The Three Effendis advocated ‘the view that the people of Xinjiang were Turks first, and Uyghurs, Kazakhs, or Kirghiz only second’ (Brophy 2016). Two of the Effendis, Alptekin and Baykozi, were also members of a group that collaborated with the Kuomintang in Chongqing, ‘preparing a draft constitution granting autonomy to Xinjiang under Chinese authorities’ (Hasanli 2020). In a somewhat ironic twist, this draft also proposed replacing the term ‘Xinjiang’, considered a historical imposition from the Manchu imperial era, with the term ‘Turkestan’ (Hasanli 2020).

In the early 1930s, Buğra held significant influence in the First East Turkestan Republic (FETR), also known as the Turkic Islamic Republic of East Turkestan (TIRET). Based in Kashgar (Kashi), TIRET lasted only about six months (12 November 1933 to March/April 1934) (D. Wang 1998). According to a diplomatic dispatch by Kabul-based Turkish Ambassador Memduh Sevket Esendal² (515.7498.38571.1: 19 February 1934), after TIRET fell, Buğra first travelled to British India and then to Afghanistan. In Afghanistan, he represented the Uyghurs and eventually met Alptekin in 1939 (Jacobs 2016). Recognizing Buğra’s potential usefulness in addressing the Xinjiang issue through cooperation with China’s Nanjing-based nationalist Kuomintang government, Alptekin persuaded the Kuomintang to bring Buğra into China, where they both worked together for the Kuomintang (Benson 1991).

At that time, Turkish diplomats believed that Buğra’s arrival in China was orchestrated by the British, as reflected in a January 1943 telegram from the Turkish Consul General in Basra (515.7341.43412.2: 1 December 1943). The consul’s opinion seems reasonable, considering subsequent research that claims Alptekin organized 1500 Uyghur and 3000 Kazakh refugees in British India into a group called the Xinjiang Provincial Association (Benson 1991). Alptekin could not have achieved this without British support, which likely also helped him bring Buğra from Afghanistan to China. This serves as crucial evidence that geostrategic considerations played a significant role in shaping Turkey’s diplomatic approach to Xinjiang specifically, and pan-Turkism more broadly.

Baykozi, the son of a wealthy Sunni Muslim merchant and landlord in Ili, began his political rise in 1936 when he was elected as Xinjiang’s representative to the Kuomintang’s Central Committee during its Fifth National Congress (Benson 1991; Forbes 1986). By late May 1947, Baykozi had become the Chairman of the Xinjiang Provincial Government. Educated in part as a medical doctor in the Ottoman Empire, Baykozi established strong connections in Turkey (Benson 1990). After returning from Ottoman Turkey to Xinjiang, he

worked as a publisher and educator, emphasizing to his students their Turkish heritage (Khalid 2022).

Baykozi maintained contact with Turkish institutions like the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (TMFA) and the Turkish Language Association (Türk Dil Kurumu, TDK). Turkish diplomatic and official correspondence – some of which cannot be fully traced but is referenced elsewhere – suggests he had a collaborative, though occasionally strained, relationship with these institutions. The documents mention Baykozi in relation to his financial dealings, work assignments and personal requests to Turkish organizations.

A diplomatic dispatch from Emin Ali Sipahi,³ the Turkish envoy in Chongqing, indicates that Turkish diplomats first contacted Baykozi in January 1940. Believing the Uyghurs lacked national cohesion and organization, the Turkish diplomatic mission in Chongqing advised Baykozi to publish his newspaper, *Yurt*, in modern Turkish's Latin script rather than Arabic script. However, he flatly rejected this recommendation (030.10.257.728.16: 29 January 1940). Despite the refusal, this interaction illustrates Turkey's nationalist, if not pan-Turkist, diplomatic interest in influencing Xinjiang.

The archived diplomatic documents reveal no contact between Baykozi and Turkey in 1941–1942. However, on 6 January 1943, the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (TMFA) asked the consulate in Chongqing via telegram what a reasonable monthly allowance would be for an average person in China. In response, A. Mennan Tebelen⁴ provided a figure of 100 lira (515.7341.43407.13: 6 January 1943; 515.7341.43407.12: 11 January 1943). On 7 April 1943, the TMFA sent a telegram to the Turkish Language Association (TDK) regarding Baykozi's request for his payments to be deposited in a bank account in British-controlled Egypt to cover his son's educational expenses, as he wanted his son to study in Egypt (515.7341.43407.6: 7 April 1943).

Baykozi's request was denied by the TDK, as he had not provided results for the work he was paid for, and further payments were halted until he completed it. This information is found in an 8 May 1943 telegram sent by the TMFA to the Chongqing consulate, which also inquired about Baykozi's work (515.7341.43407.4: 8 May 1943). The consulate replied via a telegram from Tebelen on 9 July 1943, stating that the TDK had asked Baykozi to compile Turkish dialects and collect Turkish works among the Uyghurs. For this, he had been given 200 lira and a letter of instructions from the TDK (through the consulate) on 18 February 1943 (515.7341.43407.3: 9 July 1943). This correspondence suggests that the TDK sent the payment for Baykozi on 26 January, but the consulate delivered it to him on 18 February.

After being mentioned in the 9 July 1943 telegram received by the TMFA, Baykozi's name does not reappear until 23 November 1946. In a telegram signed by the foreign minister and sent to the Turkish embassy in Nanjing, the TMFA expressed concern over the lack of news or work from Baykozi (515.7341.43407.1: 23 November 1946). The telegram requested the embassy to gather and share current information about Baykozi with the TMFA and asked the consulate to forward a letter (included in the telegram) that the TDK had prepared for him (515.7341.43407.1: 23 November 1946).

The final two references to Baykozi in these archived documents are found in separate telegrams: one sent from the Turkish embassy in Nanjing to the TMFA on 27 January 1947, and another sent by the TMFA to the Presidency of the TDK on 3 March 1947 (515.7341.43399.4: 27 January 1947 and 515.7341.43399.3: 3 March 1947, respectively).

These telegrams reveal that the TDK had written a letter to Baykozi and received a response from him, but both letters, currently untraceable, were sent via the Nanjing embassy. Interestingly, Baykozi, who pursued higher education in the Ottoman Empire and was appointed the governor of Xinjiang by the Kuomintang in late May 1947, remained in contact with Turkey for around four years, up to March 1947. He was also the only Effendi who did not flee from China to Turkey after the establishment of Communist rule in Xinjiang.

The third Effendi, Alptekin, served as a delegate to the People's Congress and met frequently with Chiang Kai-shek (O.I.R. Report No. 4451: 1947, 6).⁵ Turkey's first contact with him occurred during his visit to the TMFA in July 1939. In this meeting, he informed the ministry's interviewing officer, İnyet C. Özkaya, that he had been commissioned by Chiang Kai-shek to explain China's situation to Muslim states and to advocate for ideas and activities in support of Chiang Kai-shek (515.7484.43201.1: 10 July 1939). Alptekin stated that he was fulfilling his obligations by reaching out to Turkish government leaders and newspapers and that he would soon travel to Istanbul. Before this visit, he wanted to brief the TMFA in Ankara about the Hui (historically, the Chinese Muslims), but requested confidentiality regarding his visit and information. His interactions with the TMFA can be broadly categorized into three areas: (1) describing the situation in China, (2) presenting his requests to Turkey and (3) commenting on the USSR.

Alptekin described the situation in China as one where the government struggled to control its governors in Xinjiang and periodically resorted to force to ensure the local population's compliance. However, according to him, this approach failed to bring about a lasting solution to the governors' general tendency toward non-conformity. He also informed Özkaya that among the Hui, supporters of Turkish Muslims or Uyghurs were a minority. Additionally, he noted that the King of Egypt had invested considerable time and money to win over the Hui.

Alptekin expressed modest expectations regarding Turkey's involvement in Xinjiang, acknowledging the country's strategic diplomatic approach that often overshadowed pan-Turkist leanings. However, as a Xinjiang intellectual, he made several requests to Turkey aimed at fostering 'spiritual, intellectual intimacy' and 'cultural unity' between the Turks and Chinese Muslims (515.7484.43201.1: 10 July 1939). He framed these measures as a way to draw Chinese Muslims closer to the Turks by reducing 'the Arab influence of the Semitic race'. His primary requests were:

- Establish an embassy in China.
- Send a scientific delegation to East Turkestan; or, if this is not feasible, then to Gansu.
- Dispatch several Turks to East Turkestan to leave an impression on the locals.
- Replace a German professor⁶ teaching Chinese history at Ankara University with a Hui researcher of Chinese history written by Turks.

Meanwhile, Özkaya noted in his report uncertainty over the extent to which Alptekin could be trusted as a Kuomintang deputy assigned to promote Chinese propaganda (515.7484.43201.1: 10 July 1939).

In 1940, Mecdettin Delil, a Tashkent-born Turkish citizen who led the Turkistan Turkish Youth Union and managed the *Yeni Türkistan Dergisi* (The Journal of New Turkistan, 1927–1931), submitted a report to Turkey's Prime Ministry. This report, now part of the Prime

Ministerial archives and analysed by Muzaffer Başkaya in a 2019 Turkish-language article,⁷ criticizes Alptekin, referred to by his first and middle names Isa or Isa Yusuf. Delil condemns Alptekin as an anti-Turkist, anti-Islamic figure who undermined the Uyghur movement from within and advanced Chinese interests in Xinjiang (Başkaya 2019). He further claims that Alptekin, a long-serving translator at the Chinese Consulate in Tashkent, discouraged East Turkistani youth from going to Turkey, instead guiding them toward China and exposing young people from India to Communist ideology (Başkaya 2019).

During his confidential visit to the TMFA in July 1939, Alptekin claimed that the Soviet Union dominated Xinjiang and had aided in the destruction of the TIRET. He also alleged that the Soviets were preventing Uyghurs from traveling to Turkey for education (515.7484.43201.1: 10 July 1939). This claim aligns with a prior assertion by the Soviet ambassador that TIRET was a British creation and that the Soviet Union would not permit its survival. Ambassador Memduh Sevket Esendal, stationed at the Turkish embassy in Kabul, had similarly reported that TIRET's first Prime Minister, Sabit Damulla Abdalbaki, had a close relationship with the British that was poorly received in Hotan due to Soviet interests (515.7498.38571.1: 19 February 1934).

As a representative of the Kuomintang, Alptekin seemed to have worked diligently to weaken the TIRET from within, ensuring Xinjiang remained part of China. To achieve this, he facilitated Buğra's return to China (with British assistance) and secured his position within the Kuomintang. While orchestrating these actions, Alptekin also provided confidential information on the Chinese state to the Turkish government, indicating he may have had his own agenda in these complex manoeuvres. References to Alptekin in Turkish government documents suggest his role was to lobby for the Kuomintang in Xinjiang and disseminate Chinese propaganda in Muslim countries. Besides his 1939 visit to the TMFA, the Turkish embassy in Tokyo sent a dispatch in 1934 indicating that the Chinese government planned to publish *Turkestan Avaz* and use Alptekin to destabilize TIRET (515.7526.39489.1: 21 April 1934).

To conclude, the analysis of diplomatic archives reveals Turkey's interactions and perception of the Three Effendis, the leading pan-Turkist figures in Xinjiang affairs. Turkey sought to extend its cultural influence in the region by forming financial and political ties with them. However, the differing allegiances of the Three Effendis toward Britain, the Soviet Union and China prompted Turkish diplomats to exercise caution. This led to Turkey's mistrust of the Three Effendis, which adds to the Three Effendis' low expectations regarding Turkish support for their cause. Overall, these dynamics illustrate how geostrategic considerations overshadow pan-Turkist and pan-Islamist motivations in Turkey's diplomatic stance toward Xinjiang.

The Second East Turkestan Republic and the USSR (1944–1949)

Turkey and its overseas representatives viewed the Xinjiang issue as more than just a matter of Uyghur independence⁸ or an internal Chinese affair. Turkey's stance took into account broader geopolitical factors involving Britain, Japan and Germany, but the USSR's proximity to both Turkey and Xinjiang, as well as its established political and economic ties with Turkey, made it the most influential factor in shaping Turkey's perspective. From 1920 until World War II, the USSR and Turkey shared anti-colonial sentiments, creating a mutual bond within this geostrategic framework (Hirst 2013a).

Economically, the USSR's inability to afford industrial imports coincided with Turkey's need for low-cost industrialization. In 1932, the USSR agreed to sell Turkey \$8 million worth of industrial equipment under a twenty-year, interest-free repayment plan (Hirst 2013a). Politically, the Soviet Union's Bolshevik leadership aligned with the Republic of Turkey's emphasis on 'statism' over the Ottoman Empire's imperialist legacy, strengthening their partnership (Hirst 2013a). Moreover, Turkey assisted the USSR in establishing connections 'with postcolonial states' (Hirst 2013b).

This post-Ottoman Soviet–Turkish partnership was both political and economic. As a result, Turkey's foreign policy took account of the Soviet factor while evaluating developments in Xinjiang and the actions of other sovereign states. After World War II, however, Soviet demands for control of the Straits and territory in Eastern Anatolia pushed Turkey to align with the West through NATO (Hirst and Isci 2020).

Briefly returning to the years leading up to World War II, it is crucial to note that China was unable to protect its borders from the time TIRET was about to be established until the Communist takeover. Sensing China's vulnerability, Japan invaded Manchuria on 18 September 1931. With China's vast borders, the UK, USSR, Japan and Germany closely monitored Mongolia, Inner Mongolia, Tibet and Xinjiang (Hasanli 2020). Against this backdrop, the USSR ultimately dismantled TIRET by April 1934, perceiving it as a threat due to its foundation with British support via an alliance with China.

During those years, the USSR maintained significant control over Xinjiang. Despite Operation Barbarossa (June 1941 to January 1942) temporarily weakening Soviet influence in Xinjiang, their dominance recovered by 1943. In 1940, Sipahi, the Turkish envoy in Chongqing, reported that gaining entry or exit permission for Xinjiang required approval from the Soviet embassy (030.10.257.728.16: 29 January 1940). Meanwhile, Soviet aid to China in Xinjiang fostered a sense of sympathy towards the USSR in China.

This situation shifted after World War II, despite the Soviet-backed establishment of the SETR on 12 November 1944. Even then, the Chinese government remained relatively unconcerned with the USSR as late as February 1945, believing that the Soviets had no 'territorial ambitions in Xinjiang' and simply aimed to install a favourable regime in Urumqi (Tihwa) (Hasanli 2020).

In a 1942 report from the Turkish consulate in Chongqing, Tebelen noted that Stalin's speech, delivered on the 25th anniversary of the USSR's founding, mentioned the United States and the UK as allies and Germany and Italy as adversaries while excluding China entirely (515.7524.39761.1: 10 November 1942). This omission greatly disappointed the Chinese (515.7524.39761.1: 10 November 1942). Around two years after this speech, the Ghulja Uprising (or Yining Incident), a series of prolonged rebellions, began on 7 November 1944, and was sustained through Soviet support.

During this period, a significant number of Soviet troops and non-military personnel entered Northern Xinjiang, initially helping establish the SETR and its military wing, the Ili (Yili) National Army (INA) (Hasanli 2020). By 1945, the INA controlled Ili, Tarbagatai (Tacheng) and Altai (Ashan), enabling the SETR to maintain its autonomy until September 1949, when allegiance shifted to the emerging Communist Party of China (CPC) (D. Wang 1997). The Ghulja Uprising has since been recognized as part of the Soviet East Asian policy designed to advance Soviet interests in Xinjiang (D. Wang 1997; D. Wang 1996).

The government of the SETR comprised diverse ethnic-national and ideological factions. The right-wing group, led by Alihan Töre, consisted of idealistic autonomy-seekers like

Burgra and Sayfuddin Azizi. They believed in ‘uniting all Turkish people of Xinjiang under the banner of Islam’ and opposed both the Chinese government and the Communists. Meanwhile, pro-Soviet left-wingers, like Ahmetjan Kasimi, aligned with Soviet policies, preferred Soviet support, and viewed the USSR as ‘the main stronghold in the fight against’ the Kuomintang (Hasanli 2020).

In December 1944, the USSR, citing a busy schedule, asked China to postpone its Foreign Minister’s visit to Moscow. Ahmed Hulûsi Fuad Tugay,⁹ a Turkish diplomat, noted that the Chinese interpreted this as another perceived Soviet insult (515.7524.39758.1: 13 November 1944). In June of the same year, Turkey’s ambassador to Argentina, Abdullahat Akşin, reported to the TMFA that his Polish counterpart had shared a report from the Polish ambassador to China in Chongqing. This report suggested that China had more to fear from the USSR than from Japan, and that the USSR would benefit the most from World War II (515.7524.39759.1: 24 June 1944). Once Japan withdrew, the USSR was expected to occupy Manchuria and aim to seize Mongolia and East Turkestan. According to the report, neither the UK nor the US could effectively oppose this, leading the Chinese government to pursue a treaty with the USSR (515.7524.39759.1: 24 June 1944).

Turkey had earlier indications of Soviet involvement in China’s territorial geopolitics. In March 1944, Tebelen secretly informed the TMFA of Soviet material and moral support for a revolution in East Turkestan (515.7412.38629.1: 27 March 1944). The following month, Tebelen reported a meeting between himself as Turkey’s Chargé d’affaires and China’s Minister of Finance and Deputy Prime Minister, H. H. Kung. Kung inquired whether there was a communist party in Turkey and expressed concerns about Soviet political interference in Xinjiang (515.7499.39886.1: 2 April 1944). This diplomatic document highlighted the strong relationship between the Chinese and Turkish governments.

During this period, Turkey attempted to defend China’s territorial integrity without harming its relationship with the USSR. Concerns about Soviet relations prevented Turkey from signing an agreement with China in 1944, a situation that also reflected the growing political distance between the USSR and China. These considerations were expressed in an unsigned, anonymous document that the TMFA sent to the Turkish embassy in Chongqing (515.7500.39966.1: 29 July 1944). This political gap between the USSR and China only widened following the establishment of the SETR, headquartered in Ghulja (Yining), in November of that year.

Soviet support for the SETR continued through December 1944 and January 1945. Vladimir S. Egnarov, formerly head of intelligence for the People’s Commissariat of Internal Affairs, led the Ili rebels to significant victories in and around Ili, culminating in the capture of Ghulja’s Ayrembak fortress on 5 January 1945 (Hasanli 2020). At that time, the Chinese government, as noted by David Wang, was grappling with four major domestic issues: the Communist Party of China (CPC), Outer Mongolia, Manchuria and Xinjiang, all of which were related to the USSR (D. Wang 1997). While Wang’s list oversimplifies matters – since Outer Mongolia had been practically independent of China for decades while legally remaining a part of it – the list illustrates the overarching role of the USSR in China’s geopolitical problems. China’s weakened state meant that other nations were making decisions about its fate without its involvement. This context complicates viewing the TIRET and the SETR as merely ‘nation-states’ formed

through two revolts within ten years, a perspective held by Yasushi (2001) and Karaca (2007).

For Turkey, diplomatic records indicate that the country saw Uyghur separatism not just as a regional ethnic aspiration for independence or a pure regional uprising against China, but also as a tool used by the British, Japanese and Soviet governments to further their agendas. This perspective was not far from the truth, considering that at the Yalta Conference (4–11 February 1945), US President Franklin Roosevelt, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and Soviet leader Joseph Stalin discussed Japan and China. The UK and United States wanted the USSR to declare war on Japan, which would violate their non-aggression pact. The USSR agreed to this, provided that China recognized the independence of Outer Mongolia. Under pressure, Chiang Kai-shek made this recognition contingent on Soviet acknowledgment of China's sovereignty over Xinjiang and an end to Soviet support for the SETR (Sheng 2014). Stalin agreed that in return for China accepting Outer Mongolia's independence, the USSR would issue a statement recognizing Xinjiang's dependence on China and commit to preventing arms smuggling into the region (Sheng 2014).¹⁰

Based on this understanding, the USSR declared war on Japan, and on 14 August 1945, China and the USSR signed the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship and Alliance. While the treaty recognized China's sovereignty in Xinjiang, it stipulated that Soviet withdrawal from Xinjiang would only begin three weeks after Japan's defeat. It also clarified that Soviet aid, whether military or otherwise, was intended to help the Nationalist government fight Japan (515.7524.39756.3: 14 August 1945), implicitly excluding the Communists. The USSR maintained that Chinese Communists should show allegiance to Chiang Kai-shek (515.7524.39756.3: 14 August 1945).

In November of that year, a 10-member Chinese government delegation met with an SETR delegation in Urumqi. This meeting likely followed General Zhang's October 1945 request to Buğra and two other Effendis to return to Xinjiang to help resolve the Yining situation (Buğra 1952). A Turkish diplomatic dispatch from Özen indicates that the Turkish consulate in Chongqing learned about the meeting from the Chinese minister's translator. Arranged and mediated by a Soviet consul based in Ili, the meeting was chaired by the Chinese minister, although the Turkish diplomats mistakenly believed it was chaired by a Soviet minister (515.7412.38616.2: 12 October 1945). During the meeting, the Chinese government, then in wartime Chongqing, proposed granting administrative and representative freedoms to Xinjiang (515.7412.38616.2: 12 October 1945). However, even in 1946, the SETR retained in control of 'the three northwesternmost districts', with the Chinese government convinced of Soviet support for the SETR (Benson and Svanberg 1989).

The same Turkish dispatch incorrectly claims that East Turkestan rebels, learning of China's recognition of Outer Mongolia's independence and its decision to grant Tibet autonomy, led by Alihan Töre, captured Urumqi (Benson and Svanberg 1989). According to Turkish diplomatic notes, Alihan Töre had a force of 7000 men, mainly cavalry, supported by aircraft and tanks from Russia and Outer Mongolia (515.7412.38616.3: 6 October 1945). Although there was no attempt to capture Urumqi, the Turkish diplomats' estimates were relatively accurate regarding the size of the rebels' forces and their general Soviet support. Jamil Hasanli noted that the rebels' total strength exceeded 10,000 by the spring of 1945, and they not only possessed Chinese weapons and ammunition but also

had German-made arms seized by the Soviets from the Nazis during World War II and secretly supplied to them (Hasanli 2020).

Alihan Töre had previously asked Stalin for help in a letter dated 22 April 1945 (Hasanli 2020). Despite specific details, China was generally aware of Töre's Soviet support. When it learned he had also received military aid from Outer Mongolia, it protested to the USSR, which had significant influence over the region. In an April 1944 report filed by Tebelen from Chongqing, the Soviet embassy dismissed China's protest, citing that Outer Mongolia was an autonomous republic and that Moscow had 'no right to intervene in the internal affairs' of such republics (515.7524.39760.1: 1 April 1944). Tebelen emphasized that the Chinese protest was targeted at Outer Mongolia and mentioned having learned of a secret agreement between the USSR and Japan. He noted that the Soviet ambassador warned that the coming months would be challenging for China (515.7524.39760.1: 1 April 1944).

In April 1945, Erbey of the Turkish embassy in Chongqing wrote a confidential document (515.7500.39625.1: 19 April 1945). While interpreting the Xinjiang rebellion as a reaction to the Chinese governor's tyranny, Erbey also noted Soviet manipulation, mentioning that the rebels could trade livestock for weapons from the USSR. At the same time, the United States was unwilling to arm China against the rebellion. Concerned that Soviet interference might push Xinjiang toward the fate of the Central Asian Turkic states, he mentioned Chiang Kai-shek's awareness of the danger and his consideration of granting broad rights to the Tri-Regional Revolution administration in meetings with SETR representatives. He also reported that the embassy had learned from Chiang Kai-shek's relatives that China disagreed with the USSR on both Manchuria and East Turkestan.

By the time Erbey drafted his document, Turkey's relations with the USSR had already begun to deteriorate, significantly impacted by Germany's launch of Operation Barbarossa on 22 June 1941. This operation prompted the USSR and its Allies to pressure Turkey into joining the war, a pressure that persisted even after the Soviet victory at Stalingrad on 2 February 1943. Before this victory, the rapid advance of Axis forces into Soviet territory made Turkey reluctant to side with the Allies. Citing military inadequacies and other concerns, Turkey ultimately refused to join the fight directly against the Axis Powers, maintaining a stance of apparent neutrality that frustrated the Soviets.

After 1943, as the war began to favour the USSR, tensions between the USSR and Turkey worsened. At the Yalta Conference, Stalin advocated for amendments to the Montreux Convention that would favour Soviet interests. Subsequently, on 19 March 1945, the USSR announced the termination of its Non-Aggression Pact with Turkey (signed on 17 December 1925), effective upon its expiration on 7 November 1945. This pact had been extended through protocols in 1929, 1931 and 7 November 1935 (for ten more years) (De Luca 1977; Isci 2014).

During this period, the USSR pressured Turkey over the security of the Turkish Straits and made territorial claims on parts of eastern Turkey. Until 1947, Western powers largely ignored Turkey's urgent requests for military aid against the USSR, made in February 1945 (De Luca 1977; Isci 2014). In this geopolitical context, overt support for China could have further antagonized the Soviets. Erbey's note from April 1945 (515.7500.39625.1: 19 April 1945) reflected these challenges and underscored China's special regard for its relationship with Turkey.

More than seven months later, in December 1945, the Turkish embassy sent a document written by Tugay evaluating China's relations with the UK, France and the United States (515.7524.39754.1: 3 November 1945). Tugay claimed that the United States, which had initially been reluctant to help China, changed its stance and deployed troops in various parts of China to prevent Soviet expansion. He also noted that the United States viewed an independent China with strong purchasing power as a potential new market. Regarding the UK, Tugay claimed that Britain pressured China to accept Tibet's and Mongolia's independence.

Xinjiang geopolitics, particularly the Soviet role, are detailed in a June 1947 document sent by Muammer Hamdi Dambel, the Turkish ambassador in Nanjing, to the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (TMFA). Dambel asserts that Outer Mongolia's forces had crossed into China through the border between East Turkestan and Inner Mongolia, an act that would not have occurred without the USSR's approval, given its dominance over Outer Mongolia. He notes that the USSR not only meticulously planned the attack, with embassy officials visiting the capital of Outer Mongolia, but also supplied warplanes used by Outer Mongolian forces (515.7487.38914.2: 13 June 1947).

Dambel further claims that one Soviet objective was to incite the Uyghurs against the Chinese in Xinjiang. Although China appointed Baykozi as governor of Xinjiang and Alptekin as its General Secretary to placate the Uyghurs, the USSR had planted Ahmetjan Kasimi¹¹ as a member of the SETR governing council. The Uyghurs themselves were divided politically: some advocated unity with China, others supported the USSR, and still others favoured independence. Dambel identifies this lack of unity among the Uyghurs as the greatest threat to Xinjiang (515.7487.38914.2: 13 June 1947). He also mentions that the Chinese press vehemently opposed Outer Mongolia's militaristic incursion into Turkestan and encouraged the government to risk everything, even war with the USSR, to counter it. The United States, however, did not support China going to war with the USSR, fearing that such a conflict would ultimately strengthen Soviet control over Inner Mongolia and Xinjiang (515.7487.38914.2: 13 June 1947).

In another coded report written a day after the previous document, Dambel incorrectly states that Kasimi had camped outside Urumqi with a well-equipped force of 8000 cavalry, and that the USSR supported him (515.7487.38914.1: 14 June 1947). The report also suggests that the USSR was playing a new strategic game in Turkestan, similar to what it had done in Romania and Hungary (515.7487.38914.1: 14 June 1947). The discord between China and the USSR had grown so much that a dispatch by Tugay (dated March 1947) from the Turkish embassy in Nanjing reveals that the Chinese refused to attend a Moscow meeting regarding China, even if invited (515.7524.39751.1: 15 March 1947). They also made it clear that they would not accept any decisions about China made at that meeting (515.7524.39751.1: 15 March 1947).

The dispatches from Turkish diplomats in 1945 reflect a crucial shift in Turkey's foreign policy, where the Soviet Union became the primary concern. This change aligns with a broader trend of increasing Turkish anxiety toward the USSR, fundamentally influencing the direction of Turkey's foreign policy. Furthermore, these documents show that, until early 1945, Turkish diplomats believed the US was focused on Japan and Germany and was hesitant to arm China against its ally, the USSR.

After Germany's surrender on 7 May 1945, and Japan's on 2 September 1945, the United States began shifting its focus to China and Xinjiang, as noted in Turkish

diplomatic dispatches. Meanwhile, these dispatches suggest that the UK was pursuing the creation of an independent Tibetan state to counter Soviet influence and safeguard its access route to India. In contrast, the Soviet Union maintained a firm grip on the geopolitics of Xinjiang, according to the Turkish observations.

The Turkish diplomatic perspective was that while the USSR had dismantled TIRET in 1934, it had since been supporting and protecting the SETR. Significant differences had emerged between China and the USSR following TIRET's dissolution. Despite this, negotiations between China's representatives and their SETR counterparts continued under Soviet supervision. China's strategy aimed to shield the Uyghurs from Soviet influence by making concessions to the USSR.

The USSR's dismissive attitude towards China, treating it as neither a serious power nor an ally, and excluding it from decisions about Chinese territory, deeply disappointed and stressed the Chinese government. From the Turkish diplomatic perspective, the Soviet Union had become the greatest threat to China, even while Japan controlled significant portions of Chinese territory. The diplomatic correspondence indicates that the USSR leveraged the Uyghurs against China to ensure Outer Mongolia's independence.

Turkish diplomats believed that just as China had been powerless to prevent the establishment of TIRET, it was now unable to defend its borders or prevent the founding of the SETR. Even Chinese President Chiang Kai-shek acknowledged in 1944 that China's situation was worse than those of the Ottoman Empire and Russia after the First World War (515.7412.38626.1: 13 October 1944). The Republic of Turkey, during this time, sought to maintain friendly relations with China by not involving itself in the Xinjiang issue and avoiding disruptions in its relations with the USSR.

Turkey's changing policy towards Xinjiang (1947–1949)

In 1947, Turkish geopolitics regarding Xinjiang shifted again, as reflected in an important document signed by Tugay and sent from the embassy in Nanjing that March. In the document, Tugay notes that British and American diplomats were consistently reaching out to him, hoping to leverage Turkey's cultural influence in Xinjiang. He also observed that since Japan's surrender in World War II, the United States had begun to show a particular interest in China, particularly in Xinjiang (515.7487.38909.1: 22 March 1947).

With China under its increasing influence, the United States recognized its potential as a significant market and became increasingly wary of Soviet influence in the region. The British, similarly concerned that a Soviet-occupied Xinjiang would threaten Tibet, shared this American anxiety. Tugay thus viewed Xinjiang as a potential bridge between Turkey and the United States, considering it a 'second Manchuria'. He conveyed this perspective to the US Under Secretary of State William Walton Butterworth during his visit. Later, Butterworth confidentially informed Tugay that he had urged Chiang Kai-shek to retain Zhang Zhizhong as Xinjiang's governor (515.7487.38909.1: 22 March 1947).

Tugay believed that Turkish interests aligned with American and Chinese objectives and could only be realized in Xinjiang by countering Soviet influence. He thus encouraged Turkey to amplify the polarization between the US and the USSR. However, Tugay recognized that the agreement between China and the Three Districts Government (TDG) aligned with the SETR's interests, despite Kasimi representing Soviet interests in the TDG. Tugay also believed that Kasimi intended to separate the SETR to facilitate the

USSR's annexation of Xinjiang. The Three Effendis, called 'Turkestanis' in the document, wanted Tugay to open a consulate in Xinjiang, though he doubted that China would accept such a proposal (515.7487.38909.1: 22 March 1947).

Following a 1948 decision by the Chinese government, provinces were to elect their own governors. At the time of Tugay's report, this decision had not yet been implemented. He believed that the Chinese government feared Kasimi would otherwise assume the governorship of Xinjiang. Tugay considered Buğra to be the most suitable candidate, but noted that the province of Ili was unlikely to accept him and could rebel (515.7487.38909.1: 22 March 1947). Buğra is mentioned again in a subsequent dispatch from Nanjing in December 1947, where Dambel references a meeting with his British counterpart. In the meeting, the British ambassador asked for news about Buğra and expressed his government's concern that China was transitioning into a communist regime, which could threaten the British colony of India (515.7527.39613.1: 24 November 1947).

Tugay's second choice for Xinjiang's governorship was Baykozi, whom he considered elderly and a poor administrator but more suitable due to his broad appeal and familial connections with Ili's administrators (515.7487.38909.1: 22 March 1947). Ultimately, the Kuomintang (KMT) chose Baykozi for the position, but he was perceived as a KMT 'collaborator' with limited influence and a tarnished reputation in Xinjiang (Forbes 1986). Forbes argued that the KMT erred in overlooking the potentially more unifying and influential figures of Buğra and Alptekin (Forbes 1986).

About two years later, in February 1949, Chargé d'Affaires Mustafa Kenanoğlu at the Turkish embassy in Nanjing reported to the TMFA that the Soviet Union and China had likely begun economic negotiations in Urumqi and that the Soviet Union was seeking to secure mining privileges in the region (515.7524.39746.1: 15 February 1949). The Chinese Communist Party negotiators had stayed in the USSR for up to three months, and in a confidential March 1950 document, the TMFA speculated that these Sino-Soviet negotiations were proving difficult, with Xinjiang being a significant sticking point. The TMFA suspected that China was being forced to make concessions to the Soviet Union due to its influence in Xinjiang (515.7524.39741.1: 20 March 1950).

Overall, Turkish diplomatic documents from 1947 to 1950 reveal that the United States emerged as an important geopolitical player in China after World War II. Despite having armed China during the war, the United States was still less influential regionally than the USSR and used every opportunity to strengthen its influence, including by developing a close relationship with the Turkish embassy. The United States sought to better understand Xinjiang and hoped to leverage Turkey's influence there.

During this period, the US–Turkey relationship evolved as Turkey began opposing the USSR in China. At the same time, the United States countered the USSR by aligning with China in its conflicts with the Soviet Union. This era is notable for an unprecedented official suggestion by Turkish diplomat Tugay that Turkey's interests would be best served by a Soviet defeat. Tugay viewed the USSR as a threat to Turkey and leveraged Turkey's historical ties to Xinjiang to strengthen its relationship with the US. He advocated closer ties with Chiang Kai-shek, which reflected the growing regional influence of the United States. His comparison of the Soviet presence in Xinjiang to the Japanese occupation of Manchuria suggested that Turkey was now willing to ally with powers other than the USSR, such as the United States and the UK. Tugay's recommendation regarding

Xinjiang's governor was conveyed to, and accepted by, Chiang Kai-shek. This was at a time when British and American diplomats were actively communicating with Tugay, demonstrating that Turkey's advice was increasingly valued by both nations.

Conclusion

World War II began roughly 10 months after Atatürk, founder of the Republic of Turkey, passed away. Following the principle of 'peace at home, peace in the world', Turkey sought to maintain a balance in its relations with the warring nations and to avoid involvement in the conflict. Given that the USSR was a neighbour that had supported Turkey during the Turkish War of Independence (1919–1923) and continued to offer financial and technical aid while collaborating extensively, Turkey had to carefully consider Soviet interests in its foreign policy.

The documents examined in this study suggest that the Turkish diplomats and government authorities, who ultimately prevailed in domestic politics during these turbulent times, viewed Xinjiang primarily as a Chinese issue. Turkey aimed to remain neutral while maintaining cordial relations with China. This stance was shaped partly by domestic opposition to pan-Turkism and the suppression of overtly pan-Turkic publications. It also reflected Turkey's cautious approach toward the USSR's conflict with China on the issue. As a result, Turkey did not overtly support China and instead adhered to a policy of accommodation toward the USSR, which also helped assert its independence from the West.

Turkey did not recognize the SETR, accept its representatives or provide financial or military support. Reports from Turkey's foreign representatives indicate that Turkey harboured suspicions about the affiliations of Mehmet Emin Buğra and Isa Yusuf Alptekin, suspecting that they had maintained connections with the British. From this perspective, these three individuals, who later showed anti-Chinese sentiments, may have been operating under British guidance and support within the Chinese government from the start. This viewpoint suggests that fostering an anti-USSR administration in Xinjiang would have helped the British neutralize potential Soviet threats in Tibet and India.

The UK emerged from World War II heavily damaged and quickly ceded its influence to the United States. The United States swiftly gained prominence in Xinjiang by strengthening its relationships with both China and Turkey, which viewed the USSR as the main adversary of China in the Xinjiang region. Turkey interpreted the increased Soviet presence in Xinjiang through two main lenses:

- (1) China had been powerless to prevent the potential of a British-controlled Xinjiang, which posed a threat to the USSR due to its Turkic Republics bordering Xinjiang and sharing cultural and ethnic ties with the Uyghurs. The USSR thus took defensive measures in its approach to Xinjiang.
- (2) The USSR aimed to spread socialism in Xinjiang to integrate the Uyghurs, just as it had done with other Turkic nations.

Later recognition of China's control over Xinjiang in exchange for China's acceptance of Outer Mongolia's sovereignty confirmed an aspect of Turkey's thinking: the Soviets were leveraging Xinjiang to gain strategic advantages. However, the second point

became less relevant after World War II, as the US began to overshadow Sino-Turkish relations. Following the Korean War, Turkey hosted many expatriate or exiled Uyghurs, a role it continues to play today.

Recent academic research, notably by Tao (2021) and Klimeš (2020), emphasized Turkey's deep historical ties and ideological engagements with Xinjiang's Uyghurs, including the promotion of pan-Turkism and pan-Islamism. Their studies demonstrate Turkey's unofficial yet significant influence in Xinjiang, dating back to the late 1860s during the Ottoman period, including the nurturing of the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) and fostering solidarity with the Uyghur diaspora. Previous works by Tao (2013) and Cafiero and Viala (2017) had already illustrated Turkey's contemporary role as a sanctuary for Uyghur activists and exiles, highlighting the country's complex relationship characterized by both cultural affinity and political considerations. For decades, Turkey has served as a source of political and nationalist inspiration for the Uyghur diaspora, facilitating educational exchanges and offering refuge to Uyghurs fleeing from various regions.

However, by shedding light on the period leading up to the Korean War, this study challenged the populist claim that Turkey has always harboured ideological ambitions in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR). Although the Muslims of Xinjiang had religious, linguistic and cultural ties to the Ottoman Empire, which they supported militarily on multiple occasions, Turkey avoided supporting their uprisings, instead seeking to aid them through cooperation with the Chinese government. Turkey endeavoured to maintain this position without antagonizing the USSR until the SETR period.

Notes

1. 'Effendi' or 'effendy' (*Turkish: Efendi*) is a title of nobility meaning 'lord' or 'master'.
2. Memduh Şevket Esendal, not only a celebrated Turkish short story writer but also a diplomat and politician, made significant contributions beyond literature. He held ambassadorial roles in Tehran, Baku and Kabul, served four terms in the Turkish Grand National Assembly (TBMM), and was the General Secretary of the Republican People's Party (CHP) from 1941 to 1945. Onur Isci describes him as a figure who, despite generally aligning with the government's stance, was genuinely esteemed by Eastern Turks. See: Isci (2019).
3. Emin Âli Sipahi, a legal advisor to TMFA before he became Turkey's Chargé d'Affaires to China, was highly regarded in Turkey's government circles. He was Turkey's first Chargé d'Affaires to China. See: Duman (2023).
4. A. Mennan Tebelen, one of the most esteemed Turkish diplomats historically, served as Turkey's Chargé d'affaires in Chongqing between 19 April 1943 and 17 September 1943. Tebelen's memoirs of his time in China were published in French under the title *Carnet d'un diplomate* by Denoël in 1951.
5. This is cited in Benson (1991).
6. Wolfram Eberhard is meant.
7. See Başkaya, Muzaffer (2019).
8. This observation contrasts with R. Kutay Karaca's account's suggestion that the two Uyghur revolts of 1933 and 1944 had generated two *national* states in Xinjiang. Karaca's account overlooks the Turkish government's anxieties regarding foreign interventions into China, including Xinjiang (Karaca 2007).
9. Hulusi Fuat Tugay, Marshal Deli Fuad Pasha's (who served in the Ottoman Empire) son and a former Ottoman officer, became Turkey's first ambassador to China after diplomatic relations were upgraded on 29 October 1943. In 1951, he moved to Cairo, reflecting his wife's

connections to the Muhammad Ali Dynasty. Following King Farouk's 1952 overthrow, Egypt confiscated his wife's properties. The 'Tugay Incident' in 1953, where Tugay allegedly insulted Jamal Nasr in Cairo, led to his persona non grata status in 1954, a first for a post-Republic Turkish ambassador. See: Aydın (2019).

10. Here, Sheng (2014) has depended on the following source (whose full reference is missing): 'Sinciang'daki Üç Bölge Devrimi'nin Önemli Olaylarına Dair Kayıtlar' [Records of Major Events of the Three Districts Revolution in Xinjiang], 83–84. Note, also, Wang's following statement here:

Stalin, after making a deal with Roosevelt at Yalta, and during negotiations with the Chinese government in the summer of 1945, used Xinjiang and the CCP as bargaining chips by promising not to interfere in Xinjiang's affairs or assist the CCP, in exchange for the Chinese government's recognition of the independence of Outer Mongolia and of Soviet privileges in Manchuria and the Far East. (D. Wang 1997).

11. A TDR leader, Kasimi – who was respected by Uyghurs both within and outside China, and acknowledged by the PRC – died under suspicious circumstances on 27 August 1949 while travelling to Beijing for the PRC's foundational ceremonies. In his place, Sayfuddin Azizi (who later became XUAR's manager) attended the ceremonies as the Uyghur representative. For further details, see Brophy (2016).

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Data availability statement

The archival data used in this paper are sourced from the Turkish Diplomatic Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Turkey and are accessible to researchers. The data presented in this study are available upon request from the corresponding author.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Serdar Yurtcicek  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2391-8319>

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- 515.7341.43399.3: 3 March 1947. Çin Türkleri arasında dil araştırmaları yapmak için görevlendirilen Mesut Sabri'nin gönderdiği mektup. [Letter sent by Mesut Sabri, who was assigned to conduct linguistic research among Chinese Turks]. Fon code: 515; Box: 7341; Folder: 43399; Sequence: 3.
- 515.7341.43399.4: 27 January 1947. Çin Türkleri arasında dil araştırmaları yapmak için görevlendirilen Mesut Sabri'nin gönderdiği mektup. [Letter sent by Mesut Sabri, who was assigned to conduct linguistic research among Chinese Turks]. Fon code: 515; Box: 7341; Folder: 43399; Sequence: 4.

- 515.7341.43407.1: 23 November 1946. Çin Türkleri arasında dil araştırmaları yapmak için Türk Dil Kurumunca görevlendirilen Mesut Sabri'den 1943 senesinden beri haber alınamadığı. [There has been no news since 1943 from Mesut Sabri, who was appointed by the Turkish Language Institution to conduct language research among the Chinese Turks]. Fon code: 515; Box: 7341; Folder: 43407; Sequence: 1.
- 515.7341.43407.4: 8 May 1943. Çin Türkleri arasında dil araştırmaları yapmak için Türk Dil Kurumunca görevlendirilen Mesut Sabri'ye para gönderilmesi. [About money to be sent to Mesut Sabri, who was appointed by the Turkish Language Institution to conduct language research among the Chinese Turks]. Fon code: 515; Box: 7341; Folder: 43407; Sequence: 4.
- 515.7341.43407.6: 7 April 1943. Çin Türkleri arasında dil araştırmaları yapmak için Türk Dil Kurumunca görevlendirilen Mesut Sabri'ye para gönderilmesi. [About money to be sent to Mesut Sabri, who was appointed by the Turkish Language Institution to conduct language research among the Chinese Turks]. Fon code: 515; Box: 7341; Folder: 43407; Sequence: 6.
- 515.7341.43412.2: 1 December 1943. Doğunun tanınmış Türkçülerinden Mehmet Emin'in Doğu Türkistan'a ait el yazısı bir broşürü, Basra Başkonsolosluğumuza gönderdiği. [A handwritten brochure about East Turkestan by Mehmet Emin Buğra, one of the well-known Turkists of the East, sent to our Basra Consulate]. Fon code 515; Box: 7341; Folder: 43412; Sequence: 2.
- 515.7412.38616.2: 12 October 1945. Çin Türkistan'ı kuvvetlerinin Çin kuvvetlerini bazı bölgelerde mağlub etmesi, Çin hükümetinin bu ihtilalcilerle görüşmelerde bulunmak istemesi. [The local part of Turkestan in China forces defeating the Chinese forces in some regions; the Chinese government's desire to hold talks with these insurgents]. Fon code: 515; Box: 7412; Folder: 38616; Sequence: 2.
- 515.7412.38616.3: 6 October 1945. Rus-Çin anlaşmasındaki Moğolistan ve Tibet maddelerinden rahatsızlık duyan Çin Türkistan'ı kuvvetlerinin Çin kuvvetlerini bazı bölgelerde mağlub etmesi. [The local part of Turkestan in China forces, which were disturbed by the Mongol and Tibetan articles in the Russian-Chinese agreement, defeated the Chinese forces in some regions]. Fon code: 515; Box: 7412; Folder: 38616; Sequence: 3.
- 515.7412.38626.1: 13 October 1944. Çan Kay Şek'in milli bayramlar dolayısıyla yayınladığı beyanname de Çin'in durumunun birinci dünya savaşındaki Türkiye ve Rusya'dan daha vahim olduğunu söylemesi. [Chiang Kai-shek's statement in the declaration published on the occasion of national holidays that China's situation is more dire than Turkey's and Russia's was after the First World War]. Fon code: 515; Box: 7412; Folder: 38626; Sequence: 1.
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- 515.7487.38909.1: 22 March 1947. Rusların Türkistan'da artan etkisinden rahatsız olan Amerikalıların daha etkin bir politika uygulanması, İngilizlerin Ruslara karşı Tibeti korumak amacıyla Amerika'ya destek vermesi ve Türkistanlıların Urum'da bir konsolosluk açmamız yolundaki telkinlerinin bulunduğu şifre telgraf. [Encrypted telegram about the Americans who, disturbed by the increasing influence of the Russians in Turkestan, wish to implement a more effective policy; the British support to the United States of America for the sake of protecting Tibet from the Russians; the wishes of the people of Turkestan to open a Turkish consulate in Urum]. Fon code: 515; Box: 7487; Folder: 38909; Sequence: 1.
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